

Indo–Russia Relations During Ancient and Medieval Times: Historical Foundations of Bilateral Cooperation

Priti S. Sawale

Assistant Professor and Head
Department of Political Science
B.K. Birla College (Empowered Autonomous), Kalyan
University of Mumbai

Abstract:

There are very few studies that have explored the diplomatic, military, and economic cooperation that was developed between India and Russia in the Soviet and the post-Soviet era. But this connection goes back into the ancient and medieval past. India and what became Russia were not formally diplomatic partners during these times, but were linked to one another by a vast Eurasian trade, cultural, religious, and intellectual network. Indian goods, ideas, beliefs and art spread to areas of modern-day Russia by way of the Silk Roads, Central Asian caravan routes, the Caspian Sea, Persian trading centres, and the Volga region. Central Eurasia provides archaeological evidence of commodities and cultural influences originating in India which spread beyond the Indian subcontinent. These indirect links became more apparent during the medieval era in the form of merchants, travellers, intermediaries in diplomatic communications, and written reports. One of the earliest well-documented direct contacts between the two societies was when the Russian merchant Afanasy Nikitin travelled to India in the fifteenth century. His observations brought Indian economic, political, social and religious life to the knowledge of the Russian readers. The commercial lines, cultural contacts, religious contacts, travel literature and geopolitics of early contacts between India and Russia are explored. It posits that historical memory, from ancient to medieval times, was shaped through interactions, leading to a sense of cultural familiarity between the two nations and a symbolic basis for bilateral co-operation in the modern era.

Keywords: Medieval Silk Road trade, cultural exchange, Central Asia, Afanasy Nikitin, Russia, India.

Introduction

The relationship between India and Russia is one of the oldest in international relations today. They have been cooperating with each other in contemporary areas such as defence, energy, science, education, culture, space technology and diplomatic coordination. Diplomatic relations were officially established in 1947, and intensified during the Soviet era. However, the twentieth-century history of Indo–Russian

relations is not enough to explain the story of Indo–Russian relations. The peoples of these two geographical regions have been interlinked with each other, by networks, much earlier than the establishment of modern Indian and Russian states, across Central Asia, Persia, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and the Volga basin.

India's relationships with Russia in ancient and medieval times were seldom direct and state controlled. There were no modern borders, challenging transport and many kingdoms, empires, tribal confederations and commercial cities. Thus, products and ideas typically traversed multiple intermediaries to make it to far-flung markets. Mongolian, Chinese, Armenian, Persian, Turkic, Indian and Arab traders were responsible for connecting India and the region that would become Russia.

Use of the term “Indo–Russia relations” should be approached with great circumspection in the context of ancient and medieval times. There were no countries of India and Russia as they are now. India had multiple kingdoms and empires, and the Russian lands had various Slavic, Finnic, Turkic, and nomadic groups, which were consolidated into one of the Russian principalities and then under the leadership of Moscow. Therefore, it is necessary to view early Indo–Russian relations as a relationship between people, traders, religious communities, and political areas, and not just bilateral diplomacy.

These relationships grew into an overarching Eurasian network. Such linkages grew into an overarching Eurasian network. The Silk Roads were not one road but many roads that transported trade, goods, people, language, art, technology, and religion. India held a significant role in this system due to its textiles, spices, precious stones, medicines, metal products and intellectual traditions. The northern part of Eurasia was part of the commerce world; in this region, which included Russian territories, the Volga and Caspian were connected. Central Asia was the main axis of connection between the two regions (Frankopan, 2015; Hansen, 2012).

The present paper is an attempt to examine the historical roots of Indo–Russian relations as a bilateral relationship from ancient times till the end of the medieval period. It emphasizes trade networks, archaeological evidence, the spread of religion and culture, political developments in Eurasia, and the story of Afanasy Nikitin. It contends that these relationships did not result in a permanent alliance or even in a diplomatic relationship. Rather, they created a way of connecting, being curious, and becoming culturally at home, which later proved to be beneficial historical precedents for bilateral cooperation.

Early Indo–Russian relation: A conceptualization.

There are several methodological problems when it comes to applying modern ideas of bilateral relations to ancient history. The Russian state was gradually born out of the political scene of the northeast principalities, the Mongolian period, and the emergence of Muscovy. Likewise, the Indian subcontinent was under the rule of many regional kingdoms and imperial states such as the Mauryas, Kushans, Guptas, Delhi Sultanate, Bahmani Sultanate, Vijayanagara Empire and multiple states of the Deccan.

Thus, early contacts should be understood as not necessarily indicative of frequent contact between two coherent states. They were involved in transregional exchange systems. Indian wares could be exported from Gujarat or the Deccan to the Persian ports, thence through Persia to the Caspian, and thence to markets in the Volga region. Other goods were transported through the north western regions of India to

Afghanistan and central Asia to reach the steppes of Eurasia. Often, several business communities were involved in such exchanges, and it is hard to determine the individual Indian or Russian players.

When one speaks of historical Indo–Russian contact, however, this does not matter, because it relates to exchanges between the Indian subcontinent and geographical regions that were incorporated into Russia. The evidence of the archaeology, the commercial history, the travel accounts and the linguistic evidence indicate that these regions were not separated. They lived in a wider Eurasian context where frequency of contact was decreased but not eliminated by distance.

These early encounters are not so important because of their political organization, but because of the cumulative impact of these encounters. Trade brought knowledge of other societies. Philosophical ideas were spread by religious movements. Travellers created descriptions, which influenced their cultural views. Merchant communities established trade lanes which provided a route for diplomatic travel. These processes helped to create a sense of the history of India in Russia and the northern Eurasian markets in the Indian trade communities.

Ancient Trade Routes: from China to Rome

The most significant aspect of early contact between India and the northern Eurasian world was trade. India was a producer of commodities that could be sold throughout Asia and Europe since ancient times. The cotton fabrics, silk products, spices, dyes, sugar, medicines, ivory, pearls, precious stones and metal goods were traded via long-distance trade networks. Indian traders engaged in maritime and land trade and foreign traders came to Indian commercial centres to buy Indian goods for sale.

The Silk Roads linked the North to Bactria, Sogdiana, Tarim Basin, Persia and the steppe lands of Eurasia. Trade tracks ran from Central Asia to the Caspian, Black Sea and Volga areas. Indian merchants did not always have to journey all the way. The commodities were traded back and forth on the way to caravan cities and regional markets (Hansen, 2012).

Central Asia played a key role in this process. Balkh and Bukhara, Samarkand and Merv and Kashgar were centres of trade and cultural interaction. Indian traders and religious groups had established their presence in various regions of Central Asia, and Central Asian merchants had links with the Indian markets. The Kushan Empire was particularly significant because it was responsible for the control of the territories covering northern India, Afghanistan and Central Asia. During the Kushan era, it was in the middle of a vast swath of Eurasia that there was a proliferation of commerce and culture (Benjamin, 2018). Political stability was able to support long-distance trade during the Kushan period. The empire linked the economic hubs of the Indian subcontinent to the roads to Iran, China and the steppe. Central Asian products brought to India and Indian products exported beyond South Asia; horses, metals, and other Central Asian products. The coinage, art, and religious sponsorship of the Kushan kingdom illustrate a society that was shaped by Indian, Iranian, Greek, and Central Asian cultures.

The Pazyryk burials of the Altai Mountains have been frequently mentioned in the context of the early Indian connections to northern Eurasia. Luxury items and textiles were found that showed involvement in far-reaching commercial networks. A number of scholars have even identified specific textile patterns or

fabrics with Indian art or production. The routes they used are still subject to debate but their occurrence is testimony to the long-distance character of ancient inter-regional exchange.

Mobile pastoral people lived in the Altai region and were connected by trade routes to the steppe region. This area may have been linked to India by traders. This does not establish a direct Indian kingdom–Russian political state connection either diplomatically or for trade. It demonstrates, however, that products and artistic influences from South Asia spread into what is currently the Russian Federation. The Volga River added to the significance of the northern route of the trade of Eurasia. The Volga linked the Caspian region with northern markets and after this became a major trade route of medieval Russia. Waggon trains would be brought in from Persia and Central Asia, and move along the Volga to settlements populated by Turkic, Finnic, and Slavic inhabitants. Thus, the river enabled the future Russian territories to be connected with broader Asian trading networks.

Wars, political divisions, banditry, taxation, environment, and the cost of transportation impacted these commercial relationships. Caravans were beset by deserts, mountains, extreme weather and unpredictable protection. This meant that the amount of trade was less than that which exists today, and that luxury goods were more likely to make the trip than ordinary. However, these exchanges were not entirely absent and direct links were made between India and northern Eurasia indirectly.

The importance of intermediaries in Central Asia

Central Asia was more than a geographical link; it was a place of dynamic culture and commerce with peoples that moulded Indo–Russian relations. The merchants of Sogda were one of the most powerful traders of early medieval Eurasia. They linked to China, India, Iran and the steppe. They were not just carriers of commodities, but also language, religious concepts, artistic traditions, and business information (Foltz, 2010).

Indian traders had established significant trading positions in major trading centres of Central Asia and Indian goods were known in these markets. Meanwhile, traders from Central Asia made it to Indian cities and engaged in horse, cloth, metal, and luxury goods trading. One reason horses were significant was that Indian rulers often imported high quality horses from Central Asia. This led to close trade ties between northern trading networks and Indian courts.

These routes, though not abolished, were changed with the rise of the Turkic powers in Central Asia. Turkic rulers were the owners of strategically important areas and sometimes enjoyed taxing caravan trade. The spread of Islam also changed the culture and environment of Central Asia and northern India. Muslim merchants, scholars and travellers were part of networks that stretched from India, to Persia and Central Asia to the Volga region.

The Volga Bulgars were important traders in Eurasia, as they converted to Islam in the tenth century. Their location by the Volga led to their connection with the Islamic commercial world. Goods from India could be transported via Khwarazm and the Caspian to the markets of the Volga. Northern goods, such as furs, wax, honey, metals, and other products, were brought south, while the people from the south went north. These represent the multiple interconnections of medieval Eurasia. While far away geographically, both India and the Russian lands were involved in trade networks based on Central Asia and the Caspian area.

Intermediaries who ran these networks were key historical figures. If they had not existed, Indian goods and ideas would have flowed in a much smaller way into northern Eurasia.

The transmission of religion, ideas and culture.

Commercial networks also provided opportunities for cultural and religious exchange. One of the most significant traditions which traveled from India to Central Asia was the Buddhist tradition. It is estimated that Buddhist monks, merchants, translators and pilgrims brought Buddhist ideas, texts, art forms, and rituals to Afghanistan, Central Asia, China, and Mongolia several hundreds of years before and after the Common Era (Foltz, 2010).

Buddhist monasteries would usually come to be established along trade routes or caravan cities. They gave shelter, intellectual exchanges and institutional assistance to travelers. Buddhist ideas and beliefs were translated into Central Asian and East Asian languages, creating new local traditions. Buddhism never became prevalent in the early Slavic principalities but affected other nations that were incorporated into the Russian Empire and Russian Federation, such as those that came to be associated with Buryat, Kalmyk, and Tuva people.

Buddhism was transmitted culture-wise to the broader geographical space of Russia, albeit indirectly, but meaningfully. Later, the established Buddhist communities in Russia had an impact on the religious history and thinking of a portion of the Russian population, which also put India on an important agenda. These connections were not formed in the era of the modern diplomat: they were developed over many centuries of trans-Eurasian movement.

Central Asian visual culture was also influenced by Indian art. Buddhist sculpture, painting, motifs, and architectural features were exported to areas of Indian, Greek, Iranian, and indigenous influence. Gandharan and Kushan arts were singled out as significant in this process. Hybrid styles emerged within the Silk Roads and were spread to wider cultural contexts of Eurasia.

Knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine was also shared across language and political lines. Indian numerals, astronomy and medicine were all introduced to the Islamic intellectual world through translation and scholarly contact. Elements of this knowledge were later transferred from Persian and Arabic centres to Europe and the continent of Eurasia. The transmission of elements is not always a direct Indo-Russian exchange, it has this quality only in certain stages. However, Russian intellectual development took place in a larger context wherein knowledge systems referring to significant Indian contributions were present.

There were also medieval images of India that travelled around the rest of Eurasia, as one might expect—literary and legendary. India was often depicted as a land of great wealth, spices, gems, philosophy, religious tolerance and strange customs. These were representations which combined fact with imagination. They did however, invite traders and travellers to find out more about the sub-continent.

Cultural transmission, then, was a process that took place on several levels. Indian craftsmanship was brought to far away markets through material products. Indian philosophies were spread by religious networks. Scholarly translations conveyed aspects of Indian science. Popular and elite perceptions were

formed through travel narratives. These processes together led to a certain cultural familiarity that existed prior to formal bilateral relations.

The Mongol Eurasian System and Political Transformations

The Mongol conquests of the 13th century changed the political landscape of Eurasia and impacted long-distance contact. The Mongol Empire and its successor states encompassed vast areas from East Asia to the eastern edge of Europe. The conquests did not only destroy and expel populations, but also linked up previously separate regional networks.

The era often referred to as the “Pax Mongolica” facilitated the movement of people over much of Eurasia. Relatives controlled different regions that were visited by merchants, envoys, artisans, religious people, and travellers. Communications were made possible by roads, relay stations, passports, and systems of protection, but travel was still hazardous and subject to political interference (Jackson, 2017).

The Russian principalities were ruled by the Golden Horde, and the Central Asian and Persian territories were ruled by other Mongol successor states. While India was never part of the Mongol Empire, the Delhi Sultanate had political, military and commercial ties with neighbouring areas impacted by Mongol expansion. Northern India was invaded by refugees, soldiers, scholars and merchants from Central Asia and Persia.

The territories linked to the Volga and the northern part of the Caspian belonged to the Golden Horde. The trading centres of its were engaged in trade with Central Asia, Persia, Black Sea, and Mediterranean. Southern intermediaries may be the conduit to these markets for Indian products. Meanwhile, news of Indian affairs was spread among the merchants and officials who were moving through the Mongol world. These networks were not shattered by the disintegration of Mongol political power. Trade with other regions was still vital in the commercial cities. The rise of Muscovy and the start of its gradual downfall affected the political balance in northern Eurasia, but the Volga-Caspian trade route continued to be a key economic axis.

The growth of Islamic business culture in India, Persia, Central Asia and the Volga area was another important event. Trade was facilitated over long distances by legal systems, economic systems, communication and languages, and religious institutions. Persian was used widely in several different areas as an influential language, such as the Indian subcontinent. The widespread environment of these common people facilitated the circulation of information and goods between Indian markets and the areas linked to Russia.

The first major Russian account of India is called Afanasy Nikitin.

The most significant person involved in medieval Indo-Russian contact was the Russian merchant Afanasy Nikitin of the city of Tver. He was the first of the Russians who made it to India in the 15th century. Vasco da gama did not reach India via sea for a long time after Nikitin had gone.

Nikitin started his career in the second half of the 1460s. He journeyed down the Volga, across the Caspian Sea, through Persian lands and finally came to India through sea. He went through many political and business landscapes. He spent his time primarily in the Deccan (parts of the Bahmani Sultanate).

His story was called A Journey Beyond the Three Seas. Typically, the three seas include the Caspian Sea, Indian Ocean, and the Black Sea. It is a valuable text for its account of a merchant's observation rather than an official ambassador or religious missionary. Nikitin was very attentive to the markets, currencies, horses, farming, taxation, military organisation, social customs, and politics.

Nikitin knew about horses, and had commercial interests in their discussion. The introduction of Persian/Central Asian horses into India was of great importance for both the military and high Indian culture. As a trader he studied the economic situation and problems of horse marketing in India. These observations are evidence of the presence of regular trade relations between the Deccan and the markets of the Persian and Central Asian regions.

There was admiration and a certain uncertainty in his description of India. He saw the variety of religions, people's clothing, food, and social interactions, as well as the force and the wealth of the rulers. Meanwhile he was reading Indian society from his cultural perspective. Some of his descriptions were incomplete or based on misunderstandings, but they are important because they represent a first-hand experience of medieval India from the Russian perspective.

The trip made Nikitin's religious identity complicated. He lived long years amongst the Muslim and Hindu people who were not part of the Russian Orthodox church and finding it difficult to keep to the Christian calendar and practices. He used Russian, Persian, Arabic, and Turkic expressions in his writing. It is a multilingual character, which mirrors his cosmopolitan journey.

There are a number of reasons why the journey is important. It is first of all a proof that any sort of travel between the Russian lands and India was possible even before the direct sea communication between Russia and South Asia was established. Secondly, the path taken by Nikitin indicates the significance of the systems of the Volga, Caspian, Persian, and Indian Oceans. Third, his narrative offered to Russian society information of a highly interesting character concerning the life of India. Last but not least, the trip had become a landmark of friendship and historical ties between India and Russia.

Nikitin was not a diplomat and his visit did not lead to any lasting bilateral relations. He was not a success in business either. Still, his cultural impact on the trip was greater than the economic. He became a historical figure around whom the future generations could imagine a connection with the two societies at the beginning.

The journeys of Nikitin have been remembered over and over again in modern India and Russia. He has been honored through monuments, writings, scholarly papers and works, and cultural events. The significance given to his journey is an example of how medieval history can become a part of modern-day diplomatic symbolism. His account corroborates the notion that Indo–Russian relations have cultural roots older than the time of official diplomatic relations.

The development of the Volga–Caspian relation with Indians.

Nikitin's travel was part of a broader commercial landscape that was gradually becoming more prominent in the late medieval/early modern period. Indian traders established trade routes throughout Persia and Central Asia, especially in the northwest and west of India. Armenian traders too have made a significant contribution to the trade between India and Russia and Europe.

Astrakhan was situated close to the northern part of the Caspian Sea and the delta of the Volga which later became a flourishing Indo–Russian trade centre. The best evidence for Indian merchants in Astrakhan comes primarily from the early modern era, and from the 17th and 18th centuries. But these commercial lines that led into this settlement dated back to medieval networks.

Indian traders at Astrakhan traded textiles, dyes, spices, precious stones, medicines and all valuable things. Their presence proves that the Volga-Caspian route could support the regular commercial exchange. They lived in organised communities, had cultural traditions and linked Russian markets to commercial centres in Central Asia, Persia and India (Levi, 2002).

It is not sensible to seek to project this kind of community back into earlier centuries. However, the success related to routes, knowledge and intermediary relationships established in a long history. The medieval trade relations thus established laid the foundation for more frequent early modern relations.

The Indian merchant community also played a role in the spread of financial knowledge and business information. Merchants relied on trust, kinship, credit, and relations transnational borders. The latter were resilient in that they were not dependent solely on formal relations between rulers.

The limitations of Ancient and Medieval contacts.

The impact of early Indo–Russian contact on the history should not be overstated. There was no constant diplomatic connection like that which exists today between two countries. Communication was slow, travel was virtually unheard of, and most exchanges took place through intermediaries. Commercial routes were often disrupted by political disruptions, and regular interaction was often precluded by geographical distance at the state level.

The evidence is also patchy. Archaeological finds can only show long-distance exchange but not the nationalities of the merchants who carried it out. Travel tales are subjective and will include inaccuracies. At times ancient history is used as a symbol in later diplomatic messages to emphasise the depth of the modern friendship.

Thus, it is not possible to separate the historical fact from the diplomatic myth. The presence of ancient Indian wares in northern Eurasia does not evidence the existence of formal Indo–Russian relations. The dissemination of Buddhism in the area that became part of Russia took place over a long period of time, and was not bilateral, but indirect. This was the first Russian Grand Tour of India, and Nikitin's was remarkable.

But this does not mean that the early contacts are not relevant. Treaties and embassies are not the only means of establishing historical relationships. They also arise through trade, migration, representation of culture, and knowledge gained over time. Official cooperation is possible, particularly with the foreign states that played a role either in antiquity or in the Middle Ages, and could be used to reinforce the sense of familiarity.

The historical background of bilateral cooperation later on.

Several foundations for the future Indo–Russian relations were laid during the ancient and medieval times. First of all, it was geographical connectivity. The Silk Roads, the Central Asian routes and the Volga-

Caspian route showed that India and Russia were part of an interdependent Eurasian system. Today's projects in the field of transport, trade and connectivity are a revival of this previous geographical connection.

Commercial complementarity was the second pedestal. India contributed commodities in the northern markets, and Central and northern Eurasia horses, metals, furs, and other commodities in demand in South Asia. The list of commodities varied, but the idea of “mutually beneficial exchange” remained.

Cultural curiosity was the third foundation. The image of India came into the Russian mind through stories, religious concepts, luxury goods and travel accounts. Nikitin's story brought to life this curiosity. He was keen to observe Indian society in detail, and this, together with his multifaceted interests, helped generate a tradition of Russian interest in Indian culture.

The fourth foundation was the intermediaries. Central Asian, Persian, Armenian, Arab, Mongols and Turkic peoples linked the two regions. Thanks to their contribution, it is seen that Indo–Russian relations was cultivated in a multicultural context in Eurasia. Today, bilateral cooperation is affected by the developments of Central Asia and Caucasus, Iran and the broader Eurasian region.

Lastly, historical symbols were passed on in the early contacts that would help to establish friendship for the leaders and cultural institutions of today. A history of memory does not guarantee strategic cooperation but it can enhance public legitimacy and cultural understanding. Modern relations can be described as a continuation of an older tradition, as the commemoration of Nikitin and the recognition of Silk Road links can help to achieve this.

Conclusion

The relations between India and Russia in ancient and medieval periods were mostly commercial, cultural, religious and intellectual in nature which were mostly indirect in nature. Due to the geographic remoteness of the Indian subcontinent from the Russian lands and the political disunity and poor transportation, there was no continuity in state-to-state relationships. Yet both regions were involved in large-scale networks in Eurasia which are linked to South Asia, Central Asia, Persia, the Caspian, the Volga basin, and Eastern Europe.

The most obvious means of interaction was through trade. Indian textiles, spices, precious stones, medicines and art products were brought north through intermediaries, and horses, metals, furs, and other commodities were brought south to Indian markets. These were essential routes and key to their upkeep by central Asian and Persian trading communities. The archaeological record of northern Eurasia reveals the incredible spatial extent of ancient exchange even when there is no need to identify particular merchants.

Religious and cultural movements were another dimension. Buddhism, Indian artistic practices and parts of Indian scientific knowledge spread into Central Asia and beyond. They were reorganized with political alterations during Turkish, Islamic and Mongolian influences, but not destroyed. The Mongol system temporarily facilitated the mobility of people over large parts of Eurasia, and reinforced connections between the Volga, Caspian, Persian and Central Asian regions.

Afanasy Nikitin's journey in the fifteenth century was the most direct contact between medieval Russia and India. He observed the Indian markets, politics, religion and society, producing one of the earliest Russian accounts of the subcontinent. While the journeys did not immediately result in any permanent diplomatic relationship, they did serve as a potent historical contact.

The history of ancient and medieval interactions should not be romanticised as a bilateral alliance that never ends. They are significant in terms of the commercial trade, cultural knowledge, experiences with humans, and memory they created. These elements provided the basis for future economic, cultural and political cooperation. The time and space of relationships between the peoples of India and Russia are different, but in the historical discourse there is ample evidence that the peoples of the Indian subcontinent have been involved in common networks of Eurasia for centuries.

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